
Scandal or Rite of Passage? Historians on the Dammon Trial

Edited by Rennie Schoepflin

Several of the historians who are most actively publishing and researching material on the history of Seventh-day Adventists recently spent several hours analyzing the significance of the account of Israel Dammon's trial published in this issue of *Spectrum*. Frederick Hoyt, professor of history and political science at Loma Linda University, had discovered the account four years ago, but was so unsettled by what he found that his colleagues in Adventist history only this year learned about the report. They had read it just weeks before they gathered for their conversation together. Rennie Schoepflin, assistant professor of history of Loma Linda University, edited the extensive transcripts of their taped conversation and received approval from all participants for publication of the roundtable discussion as it appears below.

JONATHAN BUTLER, visiting scholar at the University of California at Riverside, received an M.Div. from the SDA Theological Seminary at Andrews University, and his doctorate under Martin E. Marty at the University of Chicago before teaching American religious history at both Union College and Loma Linda University. He has published many articles on Adventist history in such journals as *Church History* and in Edwin Gaustad's widely noted volume, *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). He recently coedited *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the 19th Century* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), and is currently writing a monograph entitled *Ellen G. White and Victorian America: A Study of Prophecy, Culture, and Social Change*.

RONALD GRAYBILL, associate professor of history at Loma Linda University, earned an M. Div. from the SDA Theological Seminary and received his doctorate under Timothy Smith at Johns Hopkins University. For 13 years until 1984, Graybill worked at the Ellen G. White Estate in Washington, D.C. In addition to scores of articles, he has written *Mission to Black America: The True Story of James Edson White and the Riverboat Morning Star* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press

Publishing Association, 1971). Right now, he is writing an essay on the legal guardianship of Adventist no-work fanatics in the 1840s and 1850s and preparing a correspondence course on "The Gift of Prophecy."

FREDERICK HOYT, professor of history and political science at Loma Linda University, received his doctorate from Claremont Graduate School. He subsequently received a Fulbright Scholarship to pursue further the area of his dissertation, Philippine diplomatic history. For several years he has concentrated on the period and place where Ellen Harmon and Adventism emerged from Millerism—Northern New England in the mid-1840s. Drawing on the vast number of original sources he has examined—newspapers, court data, church records—Hoyt is preparing a study that he tentatively calls *Growing Up Down East*. It will recount how Adventists appeared in the eyes of their contemporaries.

RENNIE SCHOEPFLIN edits the book-review section of *Spectrum* in addition to teaching history at Loma Linda University. As one of the few historians of science in the Adventist educational system, Schoepflin focuses on American intellectual and social history. In addition to pursuing research on early Adventist medical missionaries, he is completing his doctoral dissertation, *The Theory and Practice of Christian Science Healing in Progressive America*, at the University of Wisconsin.

—The Editors

At First I Couldn't Read It

BUTLER: How did you find this transcript of the Dammon trial, Fred?

HOYT: I was looking at all newspapers in Maine for the period 1827-1846 to see if I could find references to Ellen White's early life in the secular press. I had no particular purpose in looking at this one, the *Pisqataquis Farmer*. In

fact, I found no references to her by name until I read this document, and I was shocked by what I found.

GRAYBILL: When did you find this document, and why haven't we heard about it before?

HOYT: I've had the document about four years. Well, I think there are several reasons why I didn't share it. I think I didn't know how to handle it, for one thing. In fact, when I first saw it on the microfilm reader, I couldn't read it. First, it referred to a woman on the floor with a pillow under her head who claims she had a vision. Something told me, "You don't want to read any further." I just knew this was going to be my first notice of Ellen Harmon in a newspaper. And so I read on and it said she was from Portland, Maine, but didn't give her name. You know how it builds up. It's very dramatic. And then suddenly someone lets drop that her name is Ellen Harmon. So I shut off the microfilm reader and I called my wife. And I said, "I have something here I think maybe you better tell me not to read." And she thought that was silly. So I went back and tried to read again. I didn't get down to the name Ellen Harmon until, I think, the third try. And then I read it and said, "Well, let it go." You know, the peculiar feeling that you get, like I'm going to read about my father in jail or something? You know that feeling? But there it was.

GRAYBILL: But today, having studied more of the background of the times, you don't have the same kind of reaction, do you?

HOYT: No. When you told me you weren't shocked at all when you read it, I thought that I had been rather immature.

GRAYBILL: Did the story appear elsewhere? What kind of currency did it have at the time?

HOYT: Yes, it appeared in other newspapers then. I have it from a Boston newspaper or two, from a Portland newspaper, from a couple of other Maine newspapers, and New York state

as well. It's essentially the same account each time.

GRAYBILL: I might note here also that in a notice in *The Midnight Cry*, which was a paper published by Joshua Himes, there was a notice warning people about Israel Dammon, "whose trial has been published in all the newspapers." So it was widely known, and would have informed the perception of Ellen Harmon that many of the first-day Adventists and much of the public would have had at that time. Rather

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than the things we read in *Life Sketches*, this particular trial formed the public's image of what the Adventists in Maine were up to. They were seen as fanatics and Ellen Harmon was thought of as one of them.

SCHOEPFLIN: I'm not so sure about that. One may have told others the story of Elder Dammon, but Ellen Harmon is a rather small actor in this trial in the long run. It's the implications of sexual impropriety that would have been most scandalous in this story, and maybe the visions and behavior of Ellen Harmon didn't gain so wide a notice.

GRAYBILL: You may be right, but bear in mind also that this is published in March of 1845, and at the end of April 1845 the leaders of the Millerite movement, Himes and the others, called the conference in Albany at which they condemned Sabbathkeeping, footwashing, and visionaries. So if they were not aware of Ellen Harmon particularly, they were aware of people in Maine who were having visions, and they were uneasy with it and didn't want to be associated with it.

SCHOEPFLIN: Now Fred, you've found evidence of other visionaries in Maine besides Harmon and Dorinda Baker, haven't you?

HOYT: Yes, there are four women I know by name, plus William Foy. So there are five mentioned in the newspapers that I can name right off: Emily Clemons, Dorinda Baker, Phoebe Knapp, Ellen Harmon, and William Foy.

GRAYBILL: I've found one other as well, Mary Hamlin.

HOYT: Let me add one more point about the circulation of this story. The single most significant newspaper in Maine at this time was the Portland, Maine, *Eastern Argus*. It reported on the trial within one week. Although it did not report on the whole trial, it did mention Ellen Harmon from Portland, and stated that "A part of the evidence we have omitted, it being to [sic] gross for publication."

SCHOEPFLIN: We know that newspapers are notorious for the way in which they alter events. How can we be confident that what we've got here is a fairly accurate representation of what took place at the trial? Have you tracked down an official transcript of the trial?

HOYT: Transcripts of the trial—if there ever were any—do not exist any longer. The only surviving legal document of the trial is a legal recording of the trial and sentencing.

SCHOEPFLIN: What were the charges?

HOYT: Dammon had been charged with being "a vagabond and idle person, going about in the town of Atkinson . . . from place to place, begging." With being "a common railer or brawler, neglecting his calling or employment, mispending his earnings," and failing to "provide for the support of himself [or his] family, and against the peace of the State of Maine, and contrary to form of Statute in such cases made and provided."

BUTLER: Disturbing the peace?

HOYT: It does not use the term "disturbing the peace." That's what Ellen White used later on in commenting on the trial. But that would probably be the contemporary term.

GRAYBILL: Who were these folk: the judge, the attorneys?

HOYT: The judges and lawyers for the state were justices of the peace, who would have been amateur jurists. The only professional attorney that I've been able to find is the one who defended Dammon, James S. Holmes. He was a professional attorney who advertised in the newspaper.

GRAYBILL: What about the man who arrested Dammon?

HOYT: He was a deputy sheriff.

SCHOEPFLIN: What kind of people were called as witnesses?

HOYT: They were local citizens, all adult males. I have found 23 of the 36 witnesses in the census of 1840 and about a dozen of them in the newspapers of this period. One was a manufacturer and the others were all farmers, but that wasn't uncommon.

SCHOEPFLIN: What was the decision of the court?

HOYT: Guilty. Sentenced to 10 days in jail in Bangor, the nearest place apparently that had a jail. But he never went there. He appealed, and it was held over on appeal until the next district court session, which would have been in May; but before the court ever met, the case was quashed. Holmes had taken this case not because he was a Millerite or sympathetic to the Millerites, but because he thought it was a clear invasion of religious liberty. He was respected as a man of strong principles, and he took it on that ground only.

GRAYBILL: So on that point, at least, Ellen White's account of the trial in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 2, is fairly accurate. She simply says "the cost of court was, I think, thrown upon him, and he was released." He was never incarcerated as a result of this conviction.

HOYT: Yes, he was freed. He never served any time.

The Account Has Credibility

BUTLER: All of this is absorbingly interesting, but for us the key players are not Dammon or the witnesses or the attorney, but the Seventh-day Adventist founders, James and Ellen White, who appear in this transcript.

HOYT: But were not on trial, were not there, and were not brought to the witness stand. I think that needs to be made clear.

BUTLER: Dammon seems to be there because he was the leader; he was the elder who was overseeing the meetings, so he was considered responsible.

HOYT: I think it is important to note that Ellen Harmon and James White were not on trial; there was no reason for the witnesses to attack them at all. They were simply talking about them incidentally, so I think their testimony about James and Ellen has to be taken more seriously because of that. It seems to me, when you read through it, that the witnesses were rather neutral and quite fair to Ellen and James. They didn't use colored words or loaded adjectives at all; they just described.

BUTLER: The transcript had credibility for me also. There were conflicting stories, but the fact that there were differences of opinion about detail and they kind of got worked out lends credibility to it. I thought there was a sort of a consensus as to what was going on there.

GRAYBILL: It seems to me that the defense

witnesses corroborate virtually all that the prosecution witnesses charge, with the exception of the charge that Ellen Harmon was referred to as the "Imitation of Christ."

HOYT: That's right, that enigmatic expression is the only exception. So, we accept Elder Dammon's testimony at the trial as essentially accurate.

GRAYBILL: And so we have to assume that there was some kissing going on, that there was some crawling going on, that there was some halloing and shouting. However, it seems that witnesses for the prosecution tended to allege more physical contact between men and women, such as sitting between the legs of people, or on the laps of people, and the allegation about going into the back room. The defense didn't accept that.

SCHOEPFLIN: I think that all witnesses agreed that there was touching going on, and that people sat next to one another. The difference is in what that meant. To the defense witnesses, the touching was incidental to the fact that it was crowded, and that there was a lot going on. To the witnesses for the prosecution, it was more than that, it had sexual overtones.

GRAYBILL: I think that the prosecution wit-

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nesses saw the visions themselves as a species of fanaticism.

SCHOEPFLIN: I think so too.

GRAYBILL: But there was a theological basis for the crawling and the kissing. They made the

point themselves that the Bible says “greet all the brethren with an holy kiss.” Apparently they greeted the sisters also with the holy kiss. The crawling, believe it or not, had a Biblical basis. If you are going to go to heaven, you have to humble yourself as a little child, and that was the text they used. Children crawl, and so some used that to show that they were ready for Jesus’ coming, and others, who believed that Christ had already come spiritually, to show that they were already in heaven.

SCHOEPFLIN: You have people who were so obsessed with a kind of Biblical literalism that they went to absurd ends.

BUTLER: I don’t know. I’m not convinced that I would root this kind of behavior in Biblical literalism or a restoration of Biblical themes. There are of course 19 centuries of Biblical literalists, and these kind of episodes erupt periodically, but it isn’t a Biblicism that creates the barking, swooning, and other kinds of ecstasies that went on in frontier America.

SCHOEPFLIN: I agree with you, Jon, but we have to remember that they defended it in Biblical terms.

BUTLER: I think they were overcome with a kind of ecstasy. The Spirit was in them. They didn’t need proof texts. They were experiencing. That was their Bible. Not that they weren’t Bible believers; they wanted to be linked to tongues of fire in the past too. But do we want to say that the difference between their exercises and the exercises of Shakers or Kentucky Methodists is that these people were more literally Biblical about what they did? I see them more as part of the same kind of radical enthusiasm.

GRAYBILL: I do want to insist that their Biblicism is part of the picture. I think the Bible and their familiarity with the Bible formed an important part of their expectation of how people should behave under the influence of the Spirit. And that is particularly relevant to Ellen

White’s visions. People steeped in the prophecies of Daniel, having read that Daniel’s breath left him, resonate to Ellen White’s similar experiences.

BUTLER: I’m not disagreeing with you. I’m just sort of supplementing you. I think spiritual wifery would be an illustration here. Adventists taking other women because they had already entered the kingdom, would be, under the ordinary social etiquette, promiscuous. There’s a Biblical literalism about that, but it presupposes that the end has already happened and they’re in the new world now. You know how the Biblical literalism operates. The Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida perfectionists all three justified their very different views of sexuality and marriage with the same text: “They neither marry nor are given in marriage, but as are the angels of God in heaven.” One said celibacy, another said polygamy, and the third said complex marriage. The Biblical

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literalism is there. But there’s a sense in which enthusiasm kills the letter of the Word and replaces it with the Spirit, doesn’t it?

GRAYBILL: Well, certainly in the trial of Israel Dammon it seems to have done so. And it may be the key to Ellen White’s emergence from this crowd that she started to turn away from that.

HOYT: Maybe you don’t want to deal with the term *fanaticism*, but it seems that we need a definition. Ellen White claims she was not a fanatic, that she was fighting fanaticism. What did she mean by this?

SCHOEPFLIN: Fanaticism is bizarre and extreme

behavior.

GRAYBILL: Could we try to position Ellen White in terms of any or all of the behaviors that any of these people might have considered fanatical?

HOYT: Sure, you can list them.

GROUP: Trances, shouting, rebaptism, crawling, rolling on the floor, kissing of feet, spiritual kissing (the holy kiss), condemnation, healing, feet washing, shut door, and no-work.

GRAYBILL: I think you can identify Ellen White with shouting, rebaptism, kissing (the holy kiss), trances, shut door, and feet washing. Not mixed feet washing, however. Women washing men's feet, not men washing women's feet. It's a very curious thing. In her published books she talks about there being Biblical precedent for women washing men's feet. You can see that she's drawing a strict line. She's going as far as she can. And of course, not kissing feet. And as far as calling the visitors these bad names, we

Place yourself in Victorian America. You've got a young girl lying on the floor on a pillow for six to seven hours at night, with this hoopla going on around her. She goes into trance occasionally and then comes out of it. . . . There's a lot going on here and Ellen is a part of it.

don't have Ellen White involved in that. We do have her endorsing the shut door, though, whatever that may mean.

SCHOEPFLIN: She did tell individuals that her vision told her to tell them that they were going to hell.

GRAYBILL: That is a question that I have. Ellen

White, in her autobiography, talks about a childhood conversation with her mother, I don't know when, in which she expressed her fear of hell and her mother expressed her doubts about whether a good God would allow people to burn eternally, and she was shocked but relieved that her mother would have these questions about hell. So what was Ellen White saying there in Atkinson? That they would go to hell, or were these people who believed in hell interpreting her strong statement that you would be lost?

HOYT: You certainly can't answer that from the transcript, can you?

BUTLER: There isn't really a discrepancy, is there, in her thinking? She could use the term "go to hell" without meaning "eternally burning fire," couldn't she?

GRAYBILL: She could. And she could also say that these people would be lost in one way or another, and they could supply the "go to hell." We just can't know.

SCHOEPFLIN: And we don't know what's going on theologically in her mind at this time, whether she made that transition to disbelieving in an eternally burning hell or not, or was even troubled by it.

GRAYBILL: But we do know from independent evidence that James and Ellen White advocated and practiced rebaptism of immersed Christians clear down until at least 1850. It was considered a religious duty of those who had accepted the Advent message—the Sabbath, the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus—that they be rebaptized. And James himself rebaptized Ellen. Now, I don't have any evidence that Ellen ever advocated these multiple rebaptisms. And this is the only place we find her advocating baptism in the dead of night, in the dead of winter. How cold was it, Fred?

HOYT: Well, I can't find any temperatures in the paper there in Dover, but the average tempera-

ture was kept in Portland. In February it was 18 degrees averaged over a 10-year period. And that's in the daytime. And you notice that they arrived in sleighs. There's snow on the ground. This isn't an unusual early spring.

BUTLER: Charles Fitch had died one week before the Great Disappointment [October 22, 1844] of pneumonia because he had been baptizing people in Northeastern streams.

They Had to Move Out of There

BUTLER: I want to touch on this fanaticism matter. The reason for our list of fanatical behaviors is to raise the question of how implicated were James and Ellen in these so-called fanatical activities. And what is one's impression when one reads the transcript and hears about this woman? Place yourself in Victorian America. You've got a young girl lying on the floor on a pillow for six to seven hours at night, with this hoopla going on around her. There is allegedly rolling around, crawling. She goes into trance occasionally and then comes out of it and orders someone down to the stream to get baptized, and then she's off again, while a man cradles her head. There's kissing of feet around her. People sitting around on the floor, lying on the floor "promiscuously," exceedingly noisy, another visionary going into a bedroom with men, although it's disputed as to with whom and why. There's a lot going on here and Ellen is a part of it.

GRAYBILL: The question has to be raised: Do we know that Ellen White didn't condemn any of these activities?

BUTLER: You cannot tell from this document that she had distanced herself from fanaticism.

GRAYBILL: That's right. It's just that she does say later on that she always condemned some of these practices. You can't tell that from here;

this transcript certainly places her psychologically closer to the fanaticism than we had imagined. Part of it is just our feeling about the difference between a woman lying down on the floor, and a woman walking around having a vision.

BUTLER: It is a striking difference. Here you have a young girl in repose, on her back on a pillow, and all around her, is this tremendous frenzy and turmoil. A few years later, you have a woman standing in trance, and the room is hushed; there is this solemn audience gathered and looking at her in rapt attention. You have this community of ecstasy in the first case, and she's part of the ecstatic community; later she is the only ecstatic, which is the kind of thing Graybill's work has established.

SCHOEPFLIN: If one believes that the content of those trance experiences was to a great extent a reflection of what was happening around her, then, as the people around her became more even handed and more in control, one might expect the content of her visions to become more even handed and controlled.

GRAYBILL: I like to say that the Lord meets the needs of the people where they are.

SCHOEPFLIN: She played the role she needed to play. She fulfilled the needs of the community.

HOYT: To be accepted by them?

SCHOEPFLIN: Well, I think that the community needed people to literally get scared out of hell because the world was going to end, as Dammon said. So you're not going to tell people to give up pork because they'll live a healthier and longer life.

BUTLER: Of course you're touching on the fact that this was a radically millenarian community; looking at the end, the door was shut.

SCHOEPFLIN: Ronald and Janet Numbers have reminded us that in recalling the events just

after the disappointment Ellen White wrote that “after the passing of the time in 1844, fanaticism in various forms arose. . . . I went into their meetings. There was much excitement, with noise and confusion. . . . Some appeared to be in vision, and fell to the floor. . . . As the result of fanatical movements such as I have described, persons in no way responsible for them have in some cases lost their reason. They could not harmonize the scenes of excitement

[Ellen White’s] mind wandered for two weeks, and she feared that she would also become insane. . . . What we’ve got here is a person who was experiencing serious doubts about herself, her movement, and her role within it.

and tumult with their own past precious experience; they were pressed beyond measure to receive the message of error; it was represented to them that unless they did this they would be lost; and as the result their mind was unbalanced, and some became insane.” [*Selected Messages*, book 2, pp. 34, 35.] In *Spiritual Gifts* [pp. 51, 69] she described the same period as one of “extreme sickness,” when her mind wandered for two weeks, and she feared that she would also become insane. It is probable that this extended passage from *Selected Messages* was quasi-autobiographical, at least subconsciously. What we’ve got here is a person who was experiencing serious doubts about herself her movement, and her role within it.

GRAYBILL: That 1845 February evening with Dammon was almost Ellen White’s first venture abroad.

HOYT: That’s right. It repeatedly says she had left Portland to relate the vision that she had had. That’s why she had this meeting in Atkinson, so she could relate her vision.

GRAYBILL: I don’t know how much of this fanatic behavior went on in Portland. But in a sense she had her own first exposure to it in Atkinson. After she went through this experience, she rode calmly to the next town with James and Sister Foss in the carriage. James may have said, “Boy, I hope we never get into one of *those* again.”

SCHOEPFLIN: Or she may have said, “Boy, didn’t I make a fool of myself last night? What did I say anyway, James?” She might have been embarrassed.

HOYT: If you go back and look at all of her autobiographical writings, she makes reference to this incident in Atkinson only once. The other times she leaves it out and refers to other meetings where there was fanaticism. For example, she deals heavily with Exeter, a visit that preceded this meeting. She talks about denouncing fanaticism. But I can’t find any reference where she cites Atkinson and claims that she denounced fanaticism there. Now maybe that’s accidental, but I doubt it very much.

GRAYBILL: This incident to which you refer is reported by Ellen White in *Spiritual Gifts*, volume 2, which was published in 1860, and not in any subsequent rendition of her life story, which would include the 1880, 1888, and 1915 editions of *Life Sketches*.

HOYT: You may notice that the town and the names of Dammon and Dorinda Baker disappear from those subsequent versions. I think she wanted to forget Atkinson and Dammon. That was an aberration she regretted. Look at the way she treated Dammon later on. He was a hero to her at first. Then she wanted to distance herself from him.

SCHOEPFLIN: So she revised the past in order to solidify her later status as a more mature and responsible prophetess.

BUTLER: Adventists began to remember the past

with a selective memory, in a sense wanting to forget all of that fanatical behavior. It had been sort of the fuel of the movement that had made it go, but later, it was viewed negatively; to remember it was to retard the progress of the movement. So we have a whole shift in orientation that we need to account for.

GRAYBILL: The Shouting Methodists went through this same transition at about the same time. As Adventists moved into the Gilded Age and became more prosperous and more organized, they tended to leave behind many early practices. Ellen and James White believed that they were uncontrollable, and so gradually, they were disciplined out.

BUTLER: And you can't have competing trance mediums. So while in 1845 you have Dorinda Baker, Ellen Harmon, and a number of other female visionaries, and they are all approved of, that can't last and still have a single, integrated religious movement. You must distinguish the "true" from the "false."

GRAYBILL: Just view it sociologically if you will. Why did Ellen White succeed and Dorinda Baker, Emily Clemons, or William Foy, didn't?

BUTLER: The answer is implied in the document. Her head was in James White's hands. I think the relationship between Ellen and James is a critical one. You look all over the world at countless millenarian movements that pop up like mayflies and then disappear. I think the difference between Seventh-day Adventism and other such movements that die out is that Ellen White accommodated to the modern world. She wrote things down. They built a publishing house. She had a health vision, sure, but they built a Western Health Reform Institute. In other words, there's this institutionalization, and in a modern setting you have the resources to do this. In Central Africa, how can you publish a vision if you can't even write?

SCHOEPFLIN: But Ron's question is about the other visionaries who were all in that same

modern setting.

BUTLER: Okay. But in order to "modernize," you need the skills of a James White.

GRAYBILL: But who would James White have been without Ellen White?

BUTLER: True. It's a symbiotic relationship; without charisma there is emptiness, and charisma without order is going to disappear.

SCHOEPFLIN: Would anyone here say that there was something unique in the content of the visionary experiences of Ellen Harmon that contributed to the success of the institutions that Adventists established?

GRAYBILL: On the basis of the documents you have in front of you, you can't say that. But I

A tentative conclusion is that they failed in Maine and New England. They were in serious trouble and it took time to forget this. They had to move out of there—to the west.

could make that argument to some extent by comparing William Foy's visions with Ellen White's. There's a whole combination of factors that account for Ellen and James White's success. But it doesn't look too hopeful at Atkinson on that Saturday night.

HOYT: But you start someplace, don't you?

SCHOEPFLIN: Fred, you've tracked the Whites to Michigan, haven't you? Were they successful after Atkinson?

HOYT: Well, my very tentative conclusion is that they were a failure in Maine and New England. She herself wrote to Loughborough in 1874, that that fanaticism up there in Maine caused "a fearful stain to be brought upon the

cause of God which would cleave to the name of Adventism like leprosy." They were in serious trouble. So it took distance and time for people to forget this, and they had to move out of there—to move west to Michigan and California.

BUTLER: The Millerite leaders in Albany were saying, quite rightly, that this Seventh Month Movement had developed into a bizarre, strange crowd of people. And Ellen White owed her inception as a visionary to these oddballs.

SCHOEPFLIN: She survived because she moved away from them.

BUTLER: Absolutely. There is an irony here. A visionary starts out because there exists this strange chaos and crazy behavior. That is the context that produces these people. But, if they are to survive and have a historic impact, they have to quickly transcend this world. And she did that. So her comments that she was against fanaticism ring true to me. In a sense she owed her existence to fanaticism, and yet she would die an untimely death as a visionary if she allowed it to continue.

GRAYBILL: Lest people think we are making too much of the connection between Ellen White and the fanatics in this early era on the basis of this one document, let me remind you of the no-work fanatics in Paris, Maine. J. N. Andrews exclaimed in 1849 when Ellen White visited there, "I would exchange a thousand errors for one truth," which was probably about the rate of exchange in Paris at that time. His father was a no-work fanatic. His future father-in-law was a crawler!

The Grandson Remembers What the Son Forgets

GRAYBILL: There's one thing that we haven't discussed at all that I think will be in the minds of many readers, and it ought to be brought up

before we decide the conclusion of the whole matter. In Ellen White's own 1860 account of this, she says that the sheriff was unable to arrest Israel Dammon because the power of the Spirit was so great that although he made no resistance, men could not endure the power of God, and they would have to rush out of the house for relief.

BUTLER: And the Dammon document says there were women hanging on him and wouldn't let him go.

SCHOEPFLIN: Ellen White may have been in trance and, therefore, not conscious or in complete control of her senses when the arrest took place.

GRAYBILL: And the Lord knows there was all kinds of emotion.

BUTLER: Who cares? What's the point?

GRAYBILL: Well, the point is, was Ellen White a reliable source? Or was she lying to us to make the story look good?

SCHOEPFLIN: She may not have known what was going on, but I don't believe she lied. With all that noise going on, was it possible for a young invalid, who was lapsing in and out of visionary trances, to distinguish the hullabaloo that surrounded the ecstatic experiences from "the continued shout" that surrounded the effort to arrest Dammon?

GRAYBILL: Ellen White wrote that "*While I was speaking*, two men looked into the window. We were satisfied of their object. They entered and rushed past me to Eld. Damman [sic]. The Spirit of the Lord rested upon him, and his strength was taken away, and he fell to the floor helpless. The officer cried out, 'In the name of the State of Maine, lay hold of this man.' Two seized his arms, and two his feet, and attempted to drag him from the room. They would move him a few inches only, and then rush out of the house. The power of God was in that room, and

the servants of God, with their countenances lighted up with his glory, made no resistance.” [*Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2, p. 40. Italics supplied.]

BUTLER: I don’t know how fruitful this is. It’s the sort of explanation that no Seventh-day

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Adventist in North America has ever experienced or believes. They might believe it happened in 1845, but the idea of people coming into a room that is electrified by some supernatural power that forces them outside is just fiction to people; it’s the movies. I don’t think that is the issue. Her recollection of fanaticism and how she related to it was completely distorted. If you only had Ellen White and not this transcript, you would never imagine Ellen White in a scene like this. You would imagine her arriving at a room full of this activity, and immediately blasting everyone involved in it, and clearing the place out before the cops ever got there. Her memory of it was quite different. It was a selective memory. But the context we’ve tried to develop for explaining that is that this was a brief, ephemeral moment in the movement; it was necessary, but they had to outgrow it, and part of the way they outgrow it was in the way they remembered it, as well as the way they established order and discipline. I dispute the idea that “Now we’ve found out that Ellen White was a liar, or a bad historian.” I don’t think that was true, and I don’t think that’s the issue. It was just ordinary development in the adolescence of this movement, a rite of passage; and for people on this side of it, people who wouldn’t exist and wouldn’t have their institutions without their having gone through it to say, “Oh, we discovered this skeleton and are embarrassed.” I think that’s the wrong tack to take.

HOYT: You’re not surprised that we found this?

BUTLER: No. I would be surprised if we did not find documents like this, when one compares Adventists with other religious movements. They all are conceived in this kind of ferment.

HOYT: If we’re mature and have this sort of perspective, we should expect this and not be shocked by it?

BUTLER: Yes. The grandson remembers what the son forgets.

GRAYBILL: There is still a sense of violation, however. I don’t think it’s sexual, necessarily, but there’s a sense of violation, of sacrilege in the image of her lying on the floor all evening with these people tramping and shouting all about.

HOYT: It’s not “proper.”

Can Order Spring Out of Chaos?

GRAYBILL: I still haven’t heard from any of you what the real significance of this is. Is this just a curiosity from the past, or does it really change our view of Ellen White and our past? How ought we to relate to it today? With embarrassment or affirmation, or what?

SCHOEPFLIN: I think that a lot of Adventists are going to be scandalized by this. Some will be so scandalized that they might even believe that, if it wasn’t fabricated, at least the witnesses wanted to distort what they had seen. After that denial stage, there will be a period of depression and anxiety, and then a continued, growing distrust of the early roots of Adventism and the messages that were believed to be from God through Ellen White.

Finally, many will pick up their religious lives and start anew, but no longer with the kind of naive and overly optimistic view of their past. And that will be it.

BUTLER: I think part of the problem is that Seventh-day Adventists have been so narrow and so provincial, with so little understanding of what happens to other religious movements.

SCHOEPFLIN: But you say that as if it were something that could be done away with and still have Adventism. I'm not so sure. It seems to be part of the essence of Adventism to distinguish itself that way.

GRAYBILL: There's a way of looking at this that is still very unique and faith-confirming. To say to yourself, "Isn't it amazing! Starting there, we got to where we are?" The Lord said he'd take the weakest of the weak. We didn't quite

Ellen White was instrumental in saying; "We've got to quit time setting; we've got to get beyond this radical millenarianism."

understand all the weaknesses that were inherent in that. And apparently it took him a little while longer than we thought to get this thing really going on the most successful track.

BUTLER: What you've got here is a movement that for a brief period of time was radically millenarian. They thought that the end of the world was coming in a matter of weeks or months. And Seventh-day Adventists do not believe that today. There is still a component within the Seventh-day Adventist belief system of looking for the end of the world, but unless you go out onto the frontiers of the third world you find few who are radically millenarian, and then they are often involved in a lot of these other things—healings, trances, et cetera. What's interesting about this document is the pulling apart of the curtain on this radically millenarian phase of Seventh-day Adventism. It was extremely brief, emotional, ecstatic, and frenzied, but remarkable, not that it existed but that it existed for so short a time—only about

seven years. And Ellen White was instrumental in elongating the time table by saying; "We've got to quit time setting; we've got to get beyond this radical millenarianism."

GRAYBILL: It also sort of upsets our American view of progress. We all think of early Adventism as the golden age, when everyone was so dedicated, so committed, and so good. And when you go back to the very earliest experiences and find that, oh wow, we'd better put the golden age along about 1857.

SCHOEPFLIN: Adventists have a conflict in their minds about the golden age—some look to the future and others idealize the pristine faith of an older church.

HOYT: I think what would disturb the average Adventist more than anything else would be to discover that the White Estate knew about this all the time, and had kept it secret. That there had been a cover-up of this.

GRAYBILL: Frankly, I am a little embarrassed myself. When I read, just today, that notice in the *The Midnight Cry* about Israel Dammon, whose trial had been reported in all the papers, I knew that I had read that before and I should have immediately gone and found all the papers.

HOYT: But who cares about Israel Dammon? It didn't say Ellen Harmon. We would have all been out there 140 years ago if it had.

GRAYBILL: I know. But she mentions the trial. I should have caught on. Anyway, I am as certain as I can be that the White Estate never knew anything about it.

SCHOEPFLIN: There are also reductionist models that can explain this behavior in ways that would distance a believer from it as well.

GRAYBILL: In what sense?

SCHOEPFLIN: For example, one might use a

psychological model to explain the origin and nature of the trances and the other kinds of fanaticism that accompanied them. It won't be easy for an Adventist to accept that the rather sedate and trustworthy tenets of Adventism sprang forth from experiences that were so frenetic and confused. How can order spring out of confusion? All of the explanations we have discussed about the need for charisma and order to be married in some kind of way is fine. But what you're finally left with is order and truth springing out of confusion and chaos.

GRAYBILL: That's the thing, Rennie. We have always viewed our doctrines and beliefs really not as coming out of Ellen White's visions, but out of those Sabbath conferences. Now, if you can put this fanaticism into the Sabbath conferences, then you would have a psychological problem. But since Adventism has never considered that the doctrines grew out of her visions

SCHOEFFLIN: I don't think the typical Adventist believes that. But even if one grants that Ellen White's visions only confirmed the doctrines, then the believer is still left with a dilemma: Truth was confirmed out of this kind of chaos? No matter how one portrays the trances, they were still trances. You can use all the public relations you want to spruce up the context of the visions, but the mental state of Ellen Harmon was what?

BUTLER: They're trances but it's not a community of trance mediums, ecstasies, rollers, and spitters. It's become a group of Bible scholars now, with this one woman. The others have been discarded.

GRAYBILL: I've looked at the positive side of this affair, but I have to look at the negative side too. Lay aside the formation of doctrine, lay aside her growing out of this, lay aside everything. You still have her lying on the floor in this context, having an experience that she and later Adventists identified as a God-given communication. It strains one's credulity to

accept that God had anything to do with what was going on in that kind of chaos.

BUTLER: There is no Seventh-day Adventist alive, or that I have ever met, who would believe in that kind of phenomena.

HOYT: Is this what would bother most Adventists? That she doesn't look like Harry Anderson's picture of her in vision? Instead of being up, she's horizontal. Is that the main problem?

SCHOEFFLIN: If visions only make sense in contexts like the Dammon meetings, then once such contexts disappear, the visions are gone.

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BUTLER: What we're saying is that the context has changed; but now we have another context that is far more ordered, and Ellen is a role player in that.

SCHOEFFLIN: But you can't call them visions in the new context. You call them trances or conversion reactions. As the context changes, so does the definition of the phenomenon.

BUTLER: Bryan Wilson's point on charisma is that it is a premodern phenomenon. And the only place it occurs in the modern world is in these "gaps" in modern life, where you can have a subcommunity that still believes in healings that are supernatural interventions. That isn't the way people function normally in the modern world. Even Seventh-day Adventism is modernized in many ways. Look at its medicine, its use of higher education, its explanations for everything it does. Look at its bureaucracy in Washington, D.C. These men function in modern categories of thinking, they

read the *Wall Street Journal*, they invest in the stock market, they are modern men. Obviously, you could knock them over with a visionary now. But that doesn't mean that it isn't a reality for them in the sense that it is very important to them that their past remain intact. They can't explain the past away by saying, "Well, they were premoderns and we're moderns." They can't put it together like that.

SCHOEPFLIN: They don't do it *that* way, but they *do* explain their past away by redefining it.

BUTLER: Not completely. She had visions then. Nobody can have them now, right?

SCHOEPFLIN: No, I don't believe that most Adventists say that.

BUTLER: If Neal Wilson ran into a visionary now, he would explain that visionary in naturalistic terms. Wouldn't he?

SCHOEPFLIN: No. I think that many Adventists believe that visions occur or can occur today. And part of the reason why they believe that is that they believe the context in which visions occurred in the 1840s is very analogous to the

context in which they live today. To make it clear to them how different the context for visions really was, is to erode their confidence that they can ever occur today. I don't think that most Adventists today are persuaded that the activities of God aren't direct in people's lives. Most Adventists believe that prayers are answered, that angels visit us, and that occasionally God sends messages in dreams.

BUTLER: But these people buy medical insurance and go to doctors. These people aren't going to healers.

SCHOEPFLIN: Right. So once you've convinced them that really the context in which that kind of visitation of God works was disappearing in the late 19th century and is now gone forever, you have removed their ability to believe that those phenomena still occur today. You have secularized them.

BUTLER: No, no, *you* don't secularize them. They were secularized, and they began getting secularized by their prophet in 1847. They developed the technology, they stopped healing, and they founded a medical school. That isn't something historians did for them.